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Iran: The Shia Revolution and Iran's Neighbors

An Intelligence Assessment

Top Secret



October 1979

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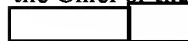
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An Intelligence Assessment

*Information available as of 19 October 1979 has been
used in the preparation of this report.*

This paper was prepared in the Near East South
Asia Division, Office of Political Analysis. Comments
and queries are welcome and may be directed to
the Chief of the Near East South Asia Division, on

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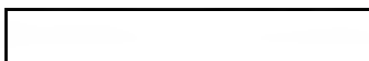
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This paper was coordinated with the Office of
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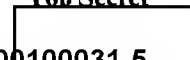


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Iran: The Shia Revolution
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Key Judgments

Ayatollah Khomeini and some influential members of Iran's religious community clearly are encouraging and in some cases assisting Shia dissidents in neighboring states.

Khomeini's focus on establishing an Islamic Republic, the continuing chaos in Iran, and the counsel of secular government officials, however, probably will be sufficient to prevent adoption of an official policy of intervention.

The statements of radical ayatollahs will keep Iraqi and Gulf suspicions at a high level and—barring an Iranian Government move to silence these figures—will prevent significant improvement of relations between Iran and its neighbors. Iraq will continue to meddle with Arab dissidents in Iran's oil-rich Khuzestan Province as a counter to Iranian encouragement of Iraqi Shias.

Iraq also will use Iranian encouragement of Gulf Shias to pose as a protector of the smaller Arab Gulf states against Persian imperialism. Iraq hopes in this way to extend its influence at the expense of Saudi Arabia.

The smaller Gulf states will increase security cooperation among themselves and with Saudi Arabia in recognition that instability in one will affect all. The larger issue of regional cooperation to protect the security of the Gulf region will remain unresolved because of the mutual suspicions and conflicting ambitions of Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.

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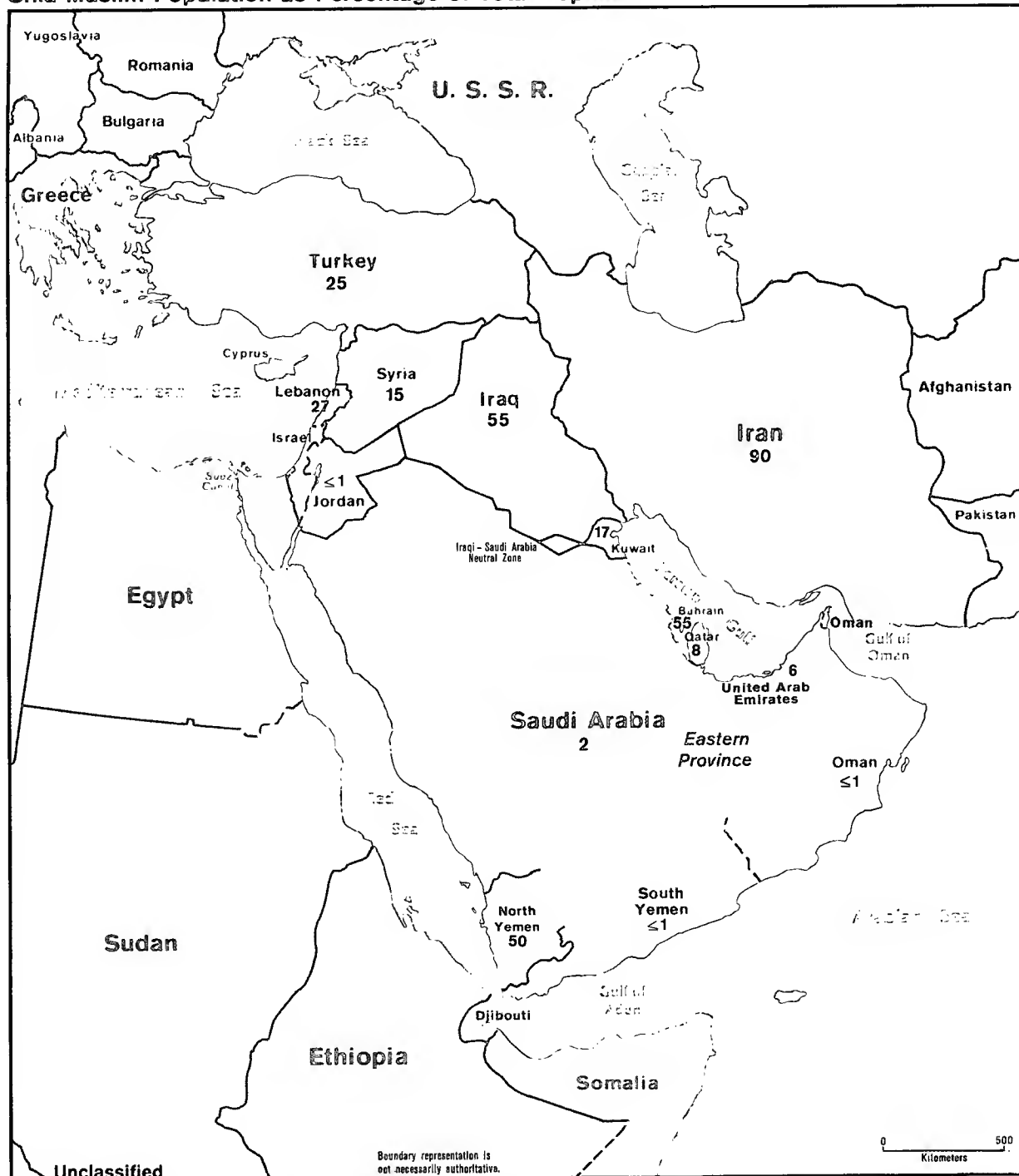
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Shia Muslim Population as Percentage of Total Population



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Iran: The Shia Revolution and Iran's Neighbor

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Shia demands for religious, economic, and political reforms have steadily increased in Iraq, Kuwait, and Bahrain since the overthrow of the Shah of Iran. In Afghanistan, the tribal insurgency against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul has been encouraged by the Iranian example, and in at least one case, Afghan rebels appear to have adopted tactics perfected during the Iranian revolution. Despite a relative absence of trouble, government authorities in Saudi Arabia, where there is a significant Shia community, remain deeply concerned about the potential for serious Shia dissidence. Saudi concern was reflected in late September by a strong Saudi message of support for Bahrain and Kuwait in the wake of Iranian encouragement of Shia unrest in those states.

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The Iranian hierarchy is divided over the policy it should adopt toward Shia communities abroad. Khomeini reportedly has ordered a policy of active assistance and is seeking to establish an international "Party of the Oppressed," which would provide a mechanism for channeling Iranian funds and influence to Shia dissidents abroad. Iran's semiofficial clerical leaders have actively encouraged Shia dissidents in Afghanistan, Iraq, Bahrain, and Kuwait and independently may have provided financial support to Persian Gulf Shias. Although in Khomeini's opinion foreign affairs is subordinate to establishing an Islamic Republic in Iran, his pan-Islamic vision and the activities of his clerical supporters will continue to encourage more assertive behavior by Shias elsewhere.

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Despite Ayatollah Khomeini's demand for a "Revolutionary Islamic" foreign policy, there is no evidence that he has compelled the Iranian Government to implement a policy of providing materiel or financial assistance to religious dissidents in the Persian Gulf states or Afghanistan.¹ Iran's continuing political instability, unrest among its ethnic minorities, eco-

¹ Shia Muslims compose 12 percent of the total population of Afghanistan; Sunni Muslims, 87 percent.

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nomie disarray, and the lack of an effective military force continue to militate against an active, interventionist foreign policy in support of pan-Islamic goals. The radical impulse of the Iranian Shia clergy to export its Islamic revolution also is constrained by the more cautious attitudes of civilian officials who presently make up Iran's provisional government and those who will continue to participate in a clergy-dominated government.

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Iranian Relations With Iraq

The potentially most explosive link between Tehran and coreligionists abroad is the tie with Iraq's Shias. Khomeini spent 13 years in exile in Iraq, residing at Kerbala, a religious center for all Shias. From here he maintained contacts with Shia centers in Iran and plotted against the Shah. As a result, Iranian religious leaders have numerous ties to the Iraqi Shia clergy that could serve as channels of support should sectarian tensions in Iraq again flare into open hostility. Each statement by an Iranian clergyman complaining of Shia persecution elsewhere strengthens Iraqi suspicions that Iran intends to meddle in Iraq politically. Iranian interference also provides a cause around which Iraq can rally the smaller Gulf states in pursuit of its own leadership ambitions. This, in turn, is likely to spur Saudi Arabia to action lest Iraqi influence grow too great.

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The secular figures in Iran's provisional government see the dangers of risking confrontation with Iraq and of stimulating a united front against Iran in the Gulf. Following meetings with Iraqi President Saddam Husayn at the nonaligned conference in Havana, Iranian Foreign Minister Yazdi reportedly said that he wanted a reconciliation with Iraq. Yazdi acknowledged that Iran has an interest in preserving the Shia religious centers in Iraq's holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala, but he indicated that Iran's interests lie in friendly relations with its neighbors, including Iraq. Iranian Government leaders reportedly turned aside an attempt made in mid-August by Syrian Foreign Minister Khaddam to obtain Iranian agreement to stimulate unrest among the Iraqi Shias.

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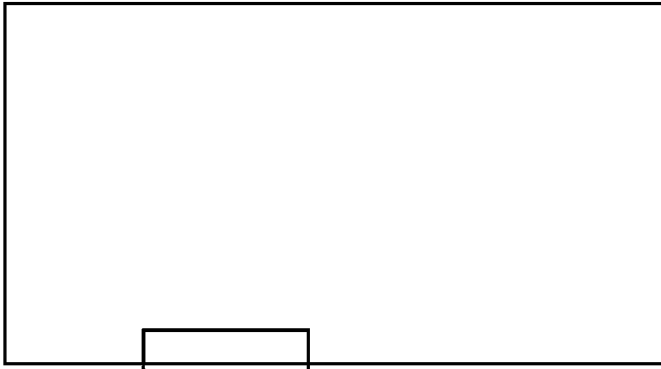
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The Iraqi View

Baghdad wants a stable relationship with Iran regardless of the political or religious orientation of the group that controls the government in Tehran. The Ba'thists were able to reach an accommodation with the Shah and probably would like to strike a similar deal with the Islamic Republic despite their aversion for the Ayatollah Khomeini. Attempts to arrange an exchange of high-level visitors, however, have foundered. Moreover, last summer's agreement to end hostile propaganda attacks has begun to fray as both Baghdad and Tehran have engaged in public recriminations following an Iranian-inspired flareup of Shia dissidence in the smaller Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

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Iraq's sensitivity to outside meddling with its Shia community reflects the long history of religious tension and violence between Iraq's Shia majority and the ruling Sunni minority. The Shia-Sunni split, which began as a dispute over the successor to the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century, still stirs strong passions in Iraq some 13 centuries later. The Sunnis regard the Shias as ignorant, superstitious throwbacks to an age best forgotten. The Shias see Sunnis as heretical and materialistic and are ill at ease with the pan-Arab thrust of the Ba'th Party, which they regard as threatening to swamp them in a Sunni Arab sea.

The Shias' sense of clannishness is reinforced by the highly emotional annual commemorations that mark the martyrdom of Ali and Husayn, who are regarded as the rightful successors to the prophet. In addition, Iraqi Shias regard themselves as special because Shias

from all over the world look to Iraq as a center of religious learning, shrines, and pilgrimages. The tombs of Ali and Husayn, for example, are located in Najaf and Kerbala.

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Iraqi Shias constitute 55 percent of the population and are in a good position to cause trouble for the predominantly Sunni Ba'thists should they adopt the Iranian experience as a blueprint for revolution. The Shias are concentrated in both urban and rural areas throughout southern Iraq. Baghdad itself may be as much as one-half Shia. Major oil pipelines pass through the Shia provinces. Strategic installations such as the port of Basrah, the Persian Gulf oil terminals, and the southern oilfields are heavily dependent on Shia labor. Shias are also strongly represented among the lower ranks of the police and the military, though the officer corps is dominated by Sunnis.

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The Ba'thist response to the dissidents' potential for disruptive activities has been a mixture of generous applications of welfare benefits with harshly repressive moves when cajolery and patronage fail. Although the military was used to put down religious rioting in the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala in February 1977, the most noticeable effect of Iran's revolution on the Iraqi Government has been to stimulate special efforts by Baghdad to conciliate the Iraqi Shia community. Development plans feature heavy commitments to housing, health care, and education, and the government has provided generous financial assistance for Shia religious activities. A number of Shias remain in top government and party posts despite recent political changes that saw three Shia members of the Revolutionary Command Council executed for plotting against the regime.

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President Saddam Husayn, not noted for his piety, also has made a personal effort to placate Shias. Saddam toured southern cities and villages early this year to meet with Shia village elders and inaugurate development projects. Saddam's public remarks during the recently concluded month of Ramadan also have an unusually strong religious flavor.

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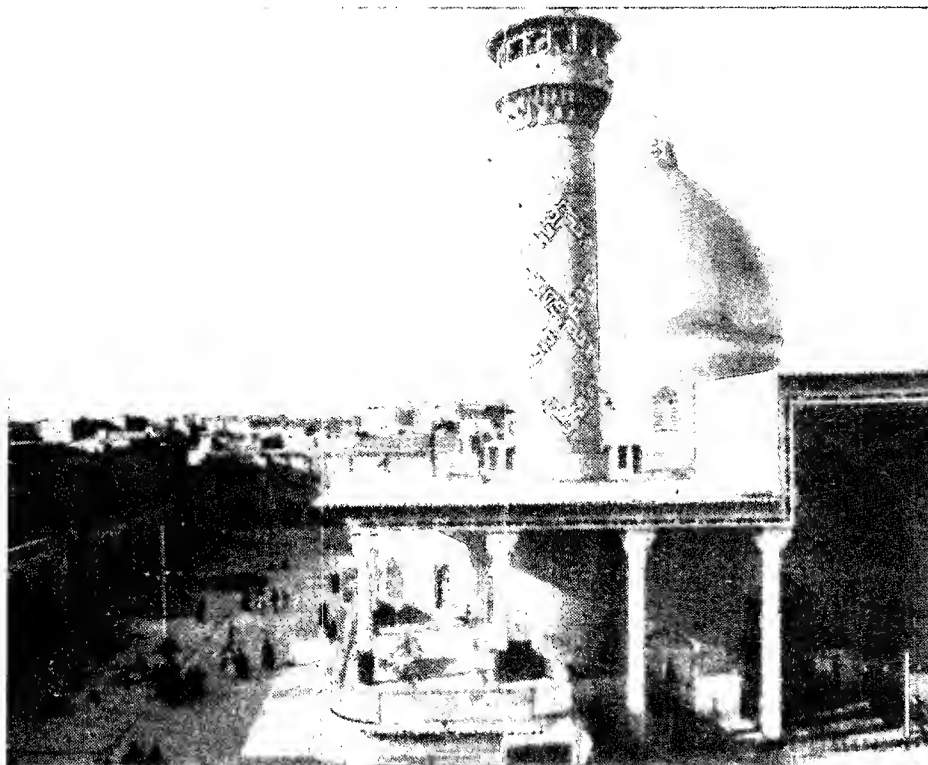
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The mosque courtyard at Kerbela, a famous Shia shrine

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Saddam Husayn talks with Shia villagers in Iraq

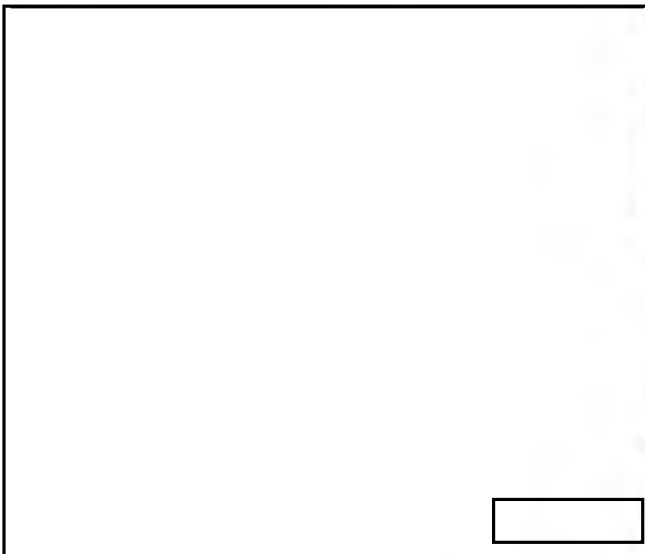
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The Persian Gulf States



Deported Bahraini
Shia leader
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The inflammatory statements by Iranian ayatollahs, together with the demonstration effect of the revolution, have encouraged Shia religious leaders, particularly in Bahrain and Kuwait, to demand that their Sunni rulers institute reforms. In Bahrain several Shia leaders have been campaigning for a return to Islamic fundamentalism. They have berated the government from the pulpit for its ungodliness and distributed leaflets and petitions demanding religious and social reforms. The Bahraini Shias have staged small demonstrations and reportedly burned a motion picture theater showing Western films. In Kuwait respected Shia religious leader Sayyid Abbas al-Mihri, Khomeini's local representative, urged his large following to seek greater political participation. Al-Mihri, together with 18 members of his family, was deported by the Kuwaiti Government on 26 September. Kuwait's Shias have distributed cassettes and leaflets and have held several pro-Khomeini demonstrations [redacted]

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The extent of Iranian support for the Shia dissidents in the Gulf states is unclear. Iranian Government officials have assured representatives of both Bahrain and Kuwait—as late as October—that Iran seeks nothing but friendly relations with its neighbors. An Iranian Foreign Ministry official stated in early September that the inflammatory remarks of Iranian religious leaders did not have the endorsement of the provisional government or the Revolutionary Council. [redacted]

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Leaders of the Persian Gulf states are concerned, however, that Iranian encouragement of Shia dissidents is more extensive than Tehran officials acknowledge. The Foreign Minister of Bahrain, Shaykh Muhammad ibn Mubarak al-Khalifa, recently told American officials that Bahrain regards Ayatollah Rouhani's call for revolution in Bahrain as having the personal backing of Ayatollah Khomeini. The Foreign Minister claimed that Rouhani's statements, together with speeches by Shia leader Mohammad Hadi al-Moderrasi, who had been expelled from Bahrain, had been carried by Iranian radio. One of these speeches, he said, had been made in the presence of Khomeini, which amounted to official Iranian endorsement of the call for revolution. Shaykh Muhammad al-Khalifa said that Bahrain had received strong messages of support from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Iraq, and that the issue would be taken up with Iranian Foreign Minister Yazdi. Arab foreign ministers from Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states met in late October in Saudi Arabia to discuss a common response to the challenge posed by Iran's meddling. The Saudi Navy also has made a well-publicized port visit to Bahrain. [redacted]

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Arab charges of more extensive links between Iran and rebellious Gulf Shias may be correct. In Bahrain, where Shias slightly outnumber the Sunnis, a ring of approximately 25 politically active Shia Mullahs was reported in May to be in daily contact with senior Khomeini confidants in Iran. The distribution of letters in Bahrain attacking the Bahraini ruling family during August was traced to Shia dissidents in contact with Shia activists in Iran, and Bahraini security

Sympathy for the Islamic reforms demanded by Shia ayatollahs is not widespread in the Gulf. Gulf Muslims, despite the strains of rapid development, show little interest in giving up the benefits of modernization in favor of a theocratic society similar to that contemplated by Ayatollah Khomeini. As long as Shia activists focus narrowly on Islamic issues, their influence probably will be limited. [REDACTED]

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In Kuwait, which has experienced a relatively low level of Shia dissident activity, contacts with radical Iranian Shias may be less extensive than in Bahrain. The Kuwaiti Shia community, however, numbers 200,000 or 17 percent of the population, of whom approximately 60,000 are expatriate Iranians who could provide numerous links to Iranian clerics. According to press reports, Ayatollah Khomeini met with a Kuwaiti Shia delegation in late August and, following this meeting, called for the creation of an international "Party of the Oppressed." Such a party would provide Khomeini with a mechanism to regulate the international activities of his supporter, channel funds, and put pressure on regimes that he might view with disfavor. [REDACTED]

The potential for significant unrest has increased substantially, however, because religious demands are being combined with calls to correct political injustices or alter economic patterns such as discriminatory hiring practices. Such a broader appeal attracts both political leftists eager to exploit Shia discontent and disgruntled members of the large expatriate labor force who, like many Shias, suffer from political and social discrimination. Newly educated youth, in particular, chafe at the almost total lack of popular representation in the Gulf monarchies and contribute to current demands for popularly elected assemblies, freedom of the press, and equal political rights. [REDACTED]

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Elsewhere in the Gulf, Shia dissidence has been relatively minor, in part because Shias in Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar make up less than 8 percent of the population. [REDACTED]

The Gulf rulers, aside from increasing existing security coordination, have unenviable options in countering the criticism. They recognize the dangers of political repression and regard it as a principal reason for the Shah's ouster. Both Kuwait and Bahrain are discussing plans to restore popularly elected assemblies that were dissolved in the mid-1970s following leftist lobbying which the regimes regarded as threatening. Yet, political concessions—however necessary to prevent an explosive upheaval—are likely to fuel demands that will erode royal authority further. [REDACTED]

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The Gulf regimes generally have moved from conciliation to firmer measures. Bahrain's Amir Isa instituted minor reforms of the liquor laws but warned the Shias not to meddle in politics. Last month Bahrain authorities arrested five leaders and deported a sixth following increased antigovernment preaching. Similarly, Kuwait arrested al-Mihri's son for delivering an unauthorized political address to a congregation of 5,000 and subsequently deported him. Both governments have issued stern public warnings against further agitation. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

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mollify the Shias. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Riyadh, nevertheless, plans to bolster the size and strength of the National Guard units in the Eastern Province to improve defense of the oil installations. [REDACTED]

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The Saudi Shias number about 125,000 (2 percent of the country's total population) and are located almost entirely in the Eastern Province, where they amount to about one-fourth of the population. They traditionally have occupied inferior economic and social positions compared with Sunnis. Shias own less land, fewer are involved in business, and they are more willing to perform the hard manual labor so distasteful to most Saudis. [REDACTED]

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The status of the Shias has improved somewhat during the past 15 years largely because of their employment in the oil industry. Shias probably account for one-quarter to one-third of the Saudi Arab oil work force. Within Aramco, the Arabian American Oil Company, a number of Shia employees have risen to relatively high positions, including supervising Sunni workers. Shia businessmen also have made significant gains in other fields, profiting from the country's economic boom; a leading Shia, for example, is in charge of directing the construction of the giant \$20 billion Jubayl industrial complex. [REDACTED]

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Discrimination against the Shias continues to exist, however, raising the potential for unrest. Most Sunnis do not regard Shias as "loyal Saudis." Few Shias are in the armed forces, and those that are rarely become officers. Employment in the police and security organizations is even more restricted; the entire police force in one sizable Shia town is Sunni. [REDACTED]

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Traditionally the Saudi Shias have been more oriented toward their Arab brethren in Bahrain and Iraq than toward the Persian Shia community, although some ties do exist. In the 1950s and 1960s Saudi Shias were implicated on several occasions in Ba'thist and Communist political activities that were inspired by Iraqi developments. [REDACTED]

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The Shia minority in Saudi Arabia reportedly has reacted to the establishment of Khomeini's rule in Iran with carefully concealed pride but has made no open manifestation of discontent over their treatment as second-class citizens in the kingdom. There is no evidence of dissident activity among Saudi Shias since Khomeini came to power last February. A London-based, Arabic-language journal, *Ad-Dustur*, reported in February the creation of an al-Hasa Liberation Organization, a reference to the oasis in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia where the Saudi Shias are concentrated, but there has been no sign that this group is conducting any significant activity either inside the country or in exile. [REDACTED]

Despite the superficial calm, there is no doubt that Saudi authorities are concerned about the potential for serious Shia dissidence in the wake of the Shah's collapse. [REDACTED] senior Saudi officials were conferring regularly about the Shia problem and especially were worried that the Shias could pose a major threat to the security of the oilfields and installations that are grouped around al-Hasa. Saudi officials admitted that the Shias have been discriminated against in the past by the country's Sunni majority and have been the object of derision by the country's Wahhabi Islamic establishment. Moreover, the Saudi security apparatus is said to have little knowledge of Shia political attitudes. [REDACTED]

The Saudi authorities reacted to Khomeini's takeover last February by strengthening police patrols in Shia centers in the Eastern Province and limiting the travel of a few Shia leaders who were involved in subversive activities in the late 1950s. These moves gradually have given way to less stringent measures, and the government's emphasis currently is on increasing government investment and expenditures in the area to

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*Saudi National Guardsmen in
Shia town.*

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Most Saudi Shias appear to be reasonably satisfied with the economic progress the community is making and probably are not eager to risk their gains. Nonetheless we suspect that some disaffected Saudi Shias are prepared to follow Khomeini's example if Iranian aid is offered. While the Saudi Shias are too few in number to overthrow the regime, their geographic location and employment in the oil industry could make the Iranian-backed Shia unrest a potentially serious problem for the government. [REDACTED]

The split between politicians and clerics, however, is again apparent. Clerical leaders have voiced strong support for the Muslim insurgents in Afghanistan. Last summer Khomeini reportedly ordered that assistance be extended to insurgents fighting anti-Islamic regimes, specifically mentioning Afghanistan. On 17 August Khomeini called on the Afghan Army and civil service to join the insurgents against the Soviet-backed government. Khomeini said that the Afghans should "take a lesson from Iran" and "kick out" the "corrupters." These views have reportedly been echoed by the senior Iranian cleric Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, who generally takes a far more cautious and conservative approach to political issues than does Khomeini but is strongly anti-Communist. In July Shariat-Madari was quoted as calling on the Muslims of the world to wage war against the Kabul government. [REDACTED]

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Afghanistan

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Iranian Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan recently reaffirmed Iran's position that it will not interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan. [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Iranian military units on the Afghan frontier are not giving any assistance to the Afghan insurgents. Moreover, Bazargan stated on 12 September that some humanitarian assistance would be provided to the 4,000 to 5,000 Afghan refugees encamped on the Iranian side of the border with Afghanistan, but that Iranian authorities would enforce the government's order prohibiting military and political activities among the refugees or any arms traffic. [REDACTED]

Despite expressions of support from Iranian clerical leaders and countercharges from Kabul that Iran has intervened actively to support the insurgents, Iranian influence on events in Afghanistan will continue to be slight. Ayatollah Khomeini has met with a delegation of Afghan Shia clergymen, and some Afghan exile groups reportedly have sought Iranian aid. Although most Afghan Muslims are Sunnis, the model of Iran's Shia revolution encouraged all opponents of the

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Marxist Kabul regime. In March, an uprising of Shia Muslims in the Afghan city of Herat, located near the Iranian border, suggested that tactics developed in Iran during the revolution against the Shah may have been emulated by Muslim rioters. Such tactics could pose a serious threat to the Kabul regime, though there is no evidence that they have spread to other cities or that Iran has intervened to assist such a movement.

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Prospects

Iranian Foreign Minister Yazdi has acknowledged the ambiguity in Iran's relations with its neighbors. The Foreign Minister and other government officials repeatedly have stated that Iran's foreign policy is based on the principle of noninterference in the internal affairs of other states. Yazdi said on 18 September, for example, that Iran neither wants to export its revolution nor send armed men to fight foreign regimes. Yazdi noted, however, that Iran could not prevent the influence of its Islamic revolution on other countries. Moreover, Yazdi appeared willing to pay lipservice to Khomeini's messianic Islamic radicalism, asserting that it would be Iran's duty to take the initiative "to spread genuine Islam and genuine Islamic revolution throughout the world."

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The activities of Iran's semiofficial clerical leaders in support of Shia dissidents in neighboring states are likely to continue. These activities, primarily confined to expressions of support, though possibly including a low level of financial assistance, pose a significant threat to the internal security of at least one state, Bahrain, and pose a potential threat in Kuwait and Iraq. The messianic, pan-Islamic radicalism of the Iranian clergy will continue to strain relations between Iran and these states and to stimulate efforts by Arab states to organize a coordinated response.

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One important effect of continued Iranian encouragement of Shia unrest—no matter how unofficial—will be to encourage Iraq to play the role of protector in the Gulf, thereby sharpening differences between Iraq and Iran. Should the dangers become immediate, Gulf rulers would have few alternatives to accepting some Iraqi protection; Saudi Arabia is too weak militarily to help, and closer security ties to the United States and the West may not be politically palatable.

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The most important restraint on Iran, however, is likely to be its own vulnerabilities. Disarray in the government and the economy, the low level of operational readiness of the Iranian military, and the pressing need to resolve domestic problems of political instability and ethnic unrest significantly inhibit Iran's ability to pursue an activist foreign policy whatever the stripe. Foreign Ministry officials are likely to continue to seek accommodation with states confronted by Shia dissidents supported by Iranian clerical leaders.

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